



Tepe Nush-i Jan: A Mound in Media

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1. *Tepe Nush-i Jan from the south. The summit of the mound stands more than 36 meters (118 feet) above the level of the plain*

Tepe Nush-i Jan:

A Mound in Media

DAVID STRONACH

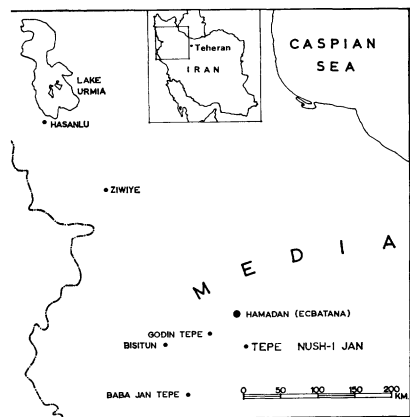
Director of The British Institute of Persian Studies, Teheran

Given the long-established fame of the Medes, it is not a little surprising to find that scarcely any Median sites have been excavated, and that we can still point to only three expeditions that are beginning to reveal more or less certain Median remains. As quite the equal of their Iranian cousins—the Persians—for most of the first half of the first millennium B.C., the Medes themselves were already “the mighty Medes” or “the distant Medes” in the Assyrian annals of the ninth century B.C.; they contributed in no small measure to the overthrow of the Assyrians in 612 B.C.; and even when Astyages, the last of the Median royal line, was defeated by Cyrus the Great in 550 B.C., it was still the combined strength of “the Medes and the Persians” that

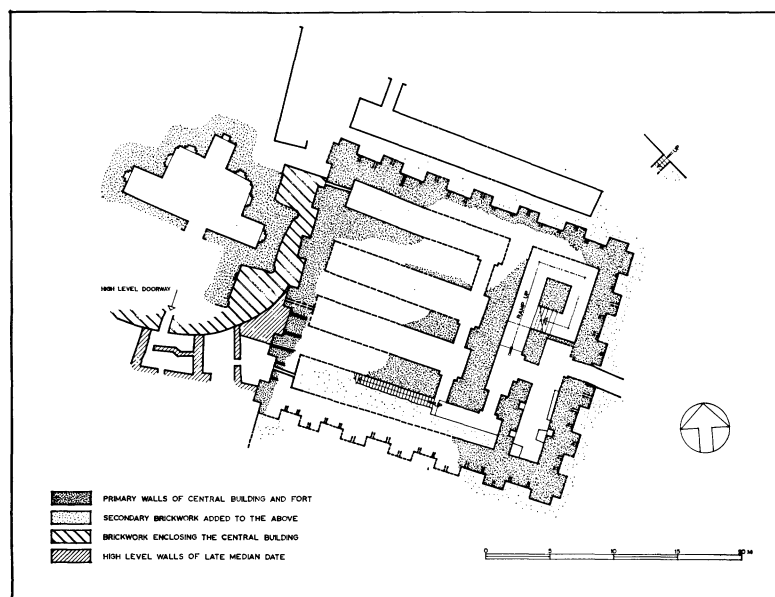
created and sustained the far-flung Achaemenian Empire.

Several related factors may help to explain why the Medes, with a still longer history than the Achaemenians, have only just begun to attract a limited number of excavators to their sites. In the first place, it has long been known precisely where the Median capital lay, and, secondly, it has always been recognized that this considerable settlement—ancient Ecbatana, now modern Hamadan—would be one of the few sites in Media capable of rivaling the appeal of either Pasargadae, the early Achaemenian capital built by Cyrus the Great (559–539 B.C.), or Persepolis, the still later capital built by Darius the Great (522–486 B.C.). Thus on the one hand the core of Hama-

Participation by The Metropolitan Museum of Art in the excavations at Nush-i Jan was made possible by the continuing support of H. Dunscombe Colt, Jr.



2. *A plan of the Central Building and the Fort at the close of the 1967 season. Dotted lines indicate restored (i.e. unexcavated) wall faces*



dan was a brilliant lure that the archaeologist could never forget, and, on the other – as an integral part of a growing modern town – its full-scale excavation always threatened to provide innumerable problems for any would-be excavator.

The first hint that certain other prospects might be at least as rewarding came when Robert Dyson and Vaughn Crawford carried out the first controlled excavations at the seventh-century mountaintop stronghold of Ziwiyeh in Kurdistan in 1964, for, while Ziwiyeh can hardly be said to lie at the very heart of Media, its terraced remains still produced a series of diagnostic pottery types that promised to act as a reliable guide to other contemporary mounds near Hamadan.

A series of more southerly surveys followed soon afterward, and an encouraging number of seventh-century sites are now known from central Media itself. Excavations at such sites have revealed what would appear to be either Achaemenian or Median stone-footed walls near the great rock of Bisitun; a small seventh-century fortress at Baba Jan Tepe in eastern Luristan; and still more elaborate seventh-century mud-brick structures at both Godin Tepe and Tepe Nush-i Jan.

At Godin Tepe alone, T. Cuyler Young, Jr.'s, excavations of 1967 revealed the plan of

an impressive seventh-century palace complete with a spacious thirty-columned hall. This same hall not only recalls the design of more narrow, ninth-century halls from Hasanlu IV (as also that of another columned hall at the eighth/seventh-century Urartian site of Altin Tepe), but it already foreshadows the broad, rectangular plan of the Residential Palace of Cyrus the Great at Pasargadae. In itself, therefore, the hall from Godin Tepe is a notable example of the far-reaching cultural and historical links that will undoubtedly come to light with the excavation of further sites of Median date during the next few years.

Many of our own hopes have also been met at the neighboring site of Tepe Nush-i Jan, where three institutions – the Metropolitan Museum, the Oriental Institute of Chicago, and The British Institute of Persian Studies – have each been associated with a first campaign of seven weeks' duration.

The Excavations

The mound of Nush-i Jan – the present-day name can be taken to mean “long life” – was first visited by Dr. Young and myself early in the spring of 1965. As we skirted the edge of the Jowkar plain, some forty-three miles south of Hamadan, we were attracted at once by the crumbled mud-brick deposit that covered the whole top of the site, itself the most prominent rock outcrop at the center of the plain (Figure 1).

The summit of the mound proved to be smooth and almost undisturbed, save for a few strange hollows of unexplained origin. The latter took on new meaning, however, when Dr. Young found one such hollow occupied by a somnolent mother pig and two of her young! Much to the benefit of what remained of our composure, the lady and her family retreated first. . . .

Even on this first visit the unusual promise of the mound was evident. The pottery suggested an almost “one period” site of seventh-century or near seventh-century date, while the exceptionally steep sides of the mound seemed to point to the original presence of strong defenses.



3. A "dust devil" hits the top of the mound: up come the stamboulis – earth-carrying trays – in self-defense

Actual excavations at the site began in August 1967, the staff of the expedition consisting of myself as Director, Mrs. Stronach, Ali Sarfaraz (Representative of the Iranian Archaeological Service), David Bivar, Oscar White Muscarella, Michael Roaf, Andrew Williamson, Ian Herring, and Susan Bird. Valuable help was received from Wolfram Kleiss, Second Director of the German Archaeological Institute, as also from Geoffrey Hewitt, A.R.I.B.A.

Without special dumping problems to consider (thanks to steep slopes on all sides) and without a vast area to probe (the flat area of our five-meter grid on the summit of the mound measured only ninety by forty-five meters – 295 by 148 feet), our first impression was that we might have a relatively short, finite task on our hands. However, we failed to reckon with two important factors: the unusual depth of the deposit and the exceptional force of the winds that started to plague us from mid-August onward (Figure 3). As a consequence, neither of the two principal structures that were encountered can be said to be fully excavated (Figure 2), and probably more

than one future season will be required to complete the exploration of the mound as a whole.

The Fort

The most complete plan at the moment comes from a structure that might also be called our Eastern Building. It consists of a small rectangular fort, approaching twenty-one by twenty-four meters (69 by 79 feet) in size, with regularly buttressed outer walls and a single external entrance less than two meters wide. The ground plan includes a guardroom beside the entrance, an adjoining ramp and staircase leading up to the second floor, and four long parallel magazines. (Something very similar to this layout can be seen in the ground plan of the corner towers of the late sixth-century Apadana at Persepolis, and we are at liberty to wonder if the Achaemenian architects of Darius were not consciously following the traditional plan of still older redoubts such as ours.)

Unfortunately the entrance to the Fort has suffered much from subsequent disturbance,



4. *The ramp inside the Fort in the course of excavation. Note the door from the guardroom at the right and the curved mud-brick struts exposed beneath the tumbled bricks of the corbeled vault*

and the first well preserved details appear at the south end of the guardroom. There we can still see at least three small wall niches – possibly used for holding lamps – and at least two raised hearths where the soldiers on guard duty must have warmed themselves during the long winter months. Passing through an inner door (presumably deliberately not in line with the outer one), we reach a long corridor that is in effect a sloping ramp. On the south this flattens out in front of an open doorway to the first of the magazines, while to the north (Figure 4) it leads to an almost square room with a square pier at the center. This last feature represents a familiar form of staircase also known from Assyria, as well as ninth-century Hasanlu. But at Nush-i Jan the scale is unusually generous and the grand manner in which the ramp itself is carried round almost four sides of the central pier before it gives way to the first steps is quite exceptional.

Unfortunately the grandeur of the concept may also have been its undoing. At any rate, parts of the mud-brick vaulting over the ramp can be seen to have collapsed, forcing the occupants of the Fort to build a new, far more modest staircase within the width of one of the adjoining magazines.

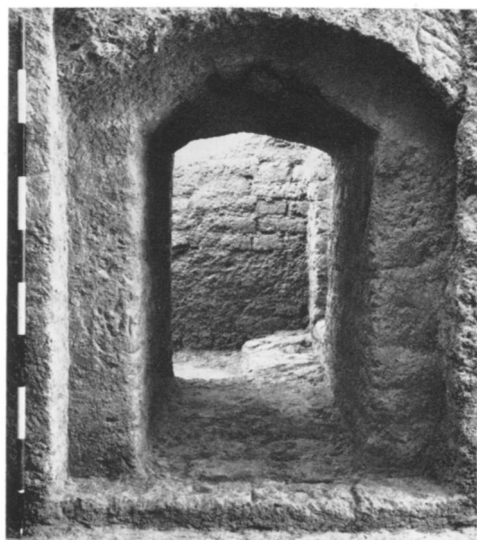
The fact that so many traces of vaulting can be found in the Fort is of special interest. Apparently wood was not used in any of the

ground-floor ceilings; strictly mud-brick elements served instead. The main weight was borne by corbeled bricks, concealed from below by long, parallel mud-brick members each pitched at an angle so they meet at the apex of the ceiling. It is difficult to think that such slender, sometimes slightly curved members could have added much reinforcement, although one has to remember that long mud-brick struts have also been found at two other sites in Iran – sixth/fifth-century Dahan-i Ghulaman in Seistan and second/first-century Shar-i Komis near Damghan – where the evident utility of such elements is not to be denied. The smaller ground-floor doors of the Fort, such as those shown in Figure 5, were not flat-topped either: instead, the standard bricks that remain in place over each opening all appear to have been pitched at a slight angle in order to produce an almost triangular upper frame. Only larger doors may have been supplied with wooden lintels, although even here the evidence is inconclusive.

As far as lighting and ventilation are concerned, three of the tall magazines are known to have had a single external window, situated at the highest point of the chamber, over five meters (16 feet) above bedrock. These same narrow windows emerge on the external, battered walls of the Fort immediately beside the multiple arrowslots (Figure 6) that slope down from the floor of the second story.

The only one of these arrowslots to retain its full height of two and a fifth meters (a little over 7 feet) is still distinguished by the standard, triangular cap of Assyrian and later times. Roughly contemporary parallels from other excavated defenses are limited to those reported from Neo-Assyrian Assur and those discovered almost thirty years ago in the northern fortification wall at Persepolis.

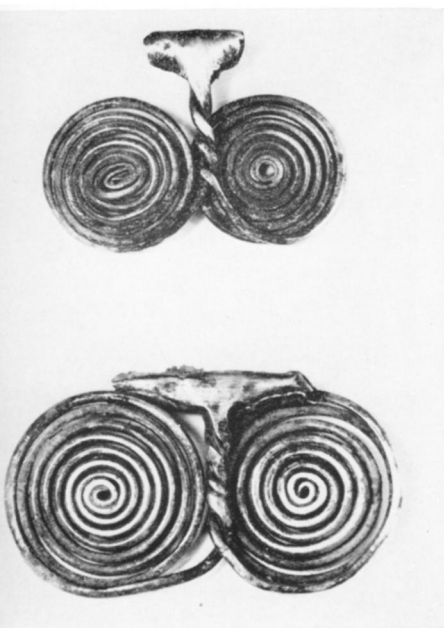
With such straight, narrow apertures it has to be conceded that the archer could only select a target immediately in front of him; but in a mass attack, with scarcely more than a meter between each arrowslot, two superimposed rows of such slots were presumably a vital addition to the firepower that could be brought to bear from the crenelated battlements of any well defended structure.



5. *A doorway between two magazines. The low, triangular upper frame remains almost intact*

6. *Part of the western wall of the Fort, showing four arrowslots and a single window (on the extreme right)*





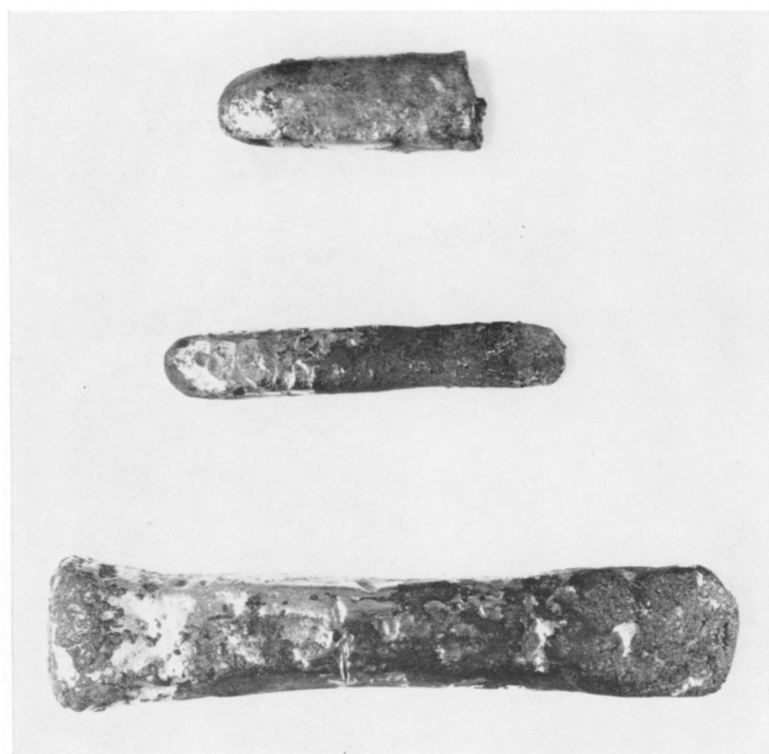
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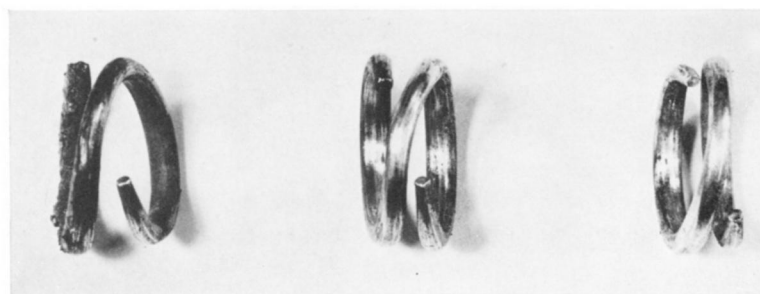
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Relatively few objects were found in the Fort, which appears to have been peacefully abandoned about 600 B.C. Yet on the last day of the dig, while we were clearing the base of the ramp, we had the good fortune to find a small silver hoard, buried in a bronze bowl and hidden beneath a single brick. The silver objects include a series of double and quadruple spiral beads (Figures 7, 8); an earring with what appears to be applied granulation (Figure 9); and an intriguing series of bars (Figure 10) and finely worked coils (Figure 11) that may prove to be samples of a local form of currency.

As far as the beads alone are concerned, the archaic character of the two main types is something of a surprise. Quadruple spiral beads are far from common as late as the seventh century B.C., and possibly the closest parallels to our long-sleeved double-spiral pendants are those from the very much older, early second-millennium settlement of Hissar IIIB in northeastern Iran.

7. *Two double spiral beads from the silver hoard found in the Fort. The largest of the beads* measures $2\frac{1}{16}$ inches in width. (Objects marked with asterisks will come to the Metropolitan Museum)*
8. *A group of quadruple spiral beads from the same silver hoard. These are perhaps the latest examples of this simple but attractive form to be found in the Near East. The ones at the top and bottom of the left-hand column* share a maximum length of $1\frac{1}{16}$ inches*
9. *A silver earring or pendant* from the hoard. Length $\frac{7}{8}$ inch*
10. *Silver bars or ingots from the hoard. That at the top has been cut; that at the bottom* appears to be marked for possible division. The latter is 100.8 grams in weight and measures $3\frac{5}{8}$ inches in length*
11. *Three silver coils from the hoard. The left and center examples* share a maximum diameter of about 1 inch*

The Central Building

Toward the middle of the mound, most of last year's work came to be concentrated on another monumental structure, our so-called Central Building (Figure 2). Possibly lozenge-shaped when it was first built, with stepped inner and outer wall faces (Figure 12), this unique mud-brick construction appears to have had at least two opposed rooms divided by a straight partition wall. It is not yet known whether or not this tower-like edifice had any outer door, although its partition wall was apparently pierced by both a wide door with a wooden lintel and at least one internal "window."

Within the one principal room that has been cleared to a depth of seven meters (23 feet) in places (just one meter above floor level) we have also found several recessed wall decorations. These include recessed crosses, square "scaffold holes," and a series of blind windows, each with a deep-set niche at the base. Similar crosses occur in the ninth/eighth-century painted pottery found in Sialk Cemetery B, while the blind windows are not entirely dissimilar to either those known from the stone "tower temples" at Pasargadae and Naqsh-e Rostam or those found inside the fifth-century B.C. temple at Marib in the Yemen.

Apart from these arresting features, a quite extraordinary effort was made to cocoon the whole edifice, probably still early in the life of the site. To begin with, the whole building was filled with small stones up to a height of six meters (20 feet). Such stones were not merely thrown in from above: they were placed in position with great care so that no part of the original structure would be damaged in any way. The large and small chips of shale used in this remarkable operation were all obtained locally – the stone being identical with that of the main Nush-e Jan hill and that of various other outcrops near it. At the end of the first part of this operation, when the pure shale fill had reached to within two meters of the top of the building, it was capped first by a series of alternate bands of mud and shale and secondly by a thick protective seal of mud brick. This last cap not only covered



12. Removing the shale fill from the main room of the Central Building. Part of the partition wall appears on the right, and some of the recessed crosses and blind windows can also be seen

the area of the large triangular room but (to add to our difficulties in the early phases of the excavation) it also ran over the original walls of the entire structure.

Beyond such direct measures to fill and seal the interior of the building, the south side of this once freestanding edifice was enveloped in a curved “bastion” of brick; its east side was concealed by the construction of the Fort (not to mention the subsequent insertion of a solid, mud-brick and shale blocking in the narrow space between the two structures); and from what can be seen in still other areas, it would seem more than likely that both the remaining faces of the building were also hidden from view by tall secondary walls.

It is possible to argue that the Fort itself may have been built for the protection of the older, ultimately cocooned structure. As Figure 2 shows, the Fort is without any arrow-slots where it adjoins the Central Building, and on top of so many other structural precautions the provision of a permanent guard would not seem too far-fetched. However, until the Central Building should have been brought to yield all its own secrets—be they those of a secular, religious, or funerary structure—and until the western end of the mound should have been excavated as well, it is probably pointless to try to define the precise function of any of Nush-i Jan’s major structures.

The floor of the Central Building has been inspected at only two points: first in the eastern recess of the triangular room, where we found nothing but a quantity of finely broken buff-ware pottery, and then in one corner of the northern recess, where the stone fill was found to rest on a thin layer of gray ash.

Other Median Structures

Immediately outside the upper walls of the curved “bastion” we were able to uncover several small rooms, each probably contemporary with similar extensions outside the original walls of the Fort itself. In these we were fortunate enough to find several objects of bronze, including an elbow fibula (Figure 13) of a type attested toward the end of the seventh century at Nimrud and a small, force-

fully modeled head of the Assyrian demon Pazuzu (Figure 14), which is not at all unlikely to have been looted from Assyria.

At the western end of the mound, an isolated test trench would seem to have hit upon the upper walls of yet a third monumental structure. Here again the character of the building remains in doubt, although from the exceptional number of more or less complete pottery forms found in a second- or third-floor room we can perhaps hope to uncover at least a good part of a multistoried residential structure.

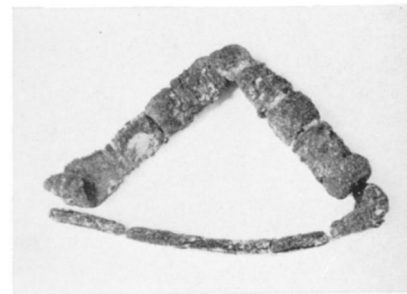
Chronology

At this stage in the excavations it is still difficult to offer firm dates for each phase of construction at Nush-i Jan. But if we compare the weathered exterior of the Central Building with that of the Fort, it is not difficult to suppose that the former construction must have stood exposed to the elements for many years before any other building was erected on the bare rock beside it. Moreover, our only carbon-14 date from Tepe Nush-i Jan is a seemingly early one from the fill of the Central Building, where a fragment of wood has given us a date of 723 ± 220 B.C.

From such combined evidence it is perhaps not unreasonable to place the construction of the Central Building a little before 700 B.C. and the construction of the Fort at least a few decades later. A close study of the pottery from each structure is still in progress, but for the moment there is no concrete evidence that would seem to quarrel with either of these tentative estimates.

As for the date when the Fort fell out of use, it can only be said that there is little evidence of a particularly long occupation. The collapse of Assyria and the gradual erosion of Scythian power must have produced a feeling of greater security in central Media after 612 B.C., but whether or not this new situation should be held responsible for the ultimate abandonment of our own, somewhat singular establishment is still another question.

Finally, after a definite break with even the latest pottery forms of Median date (Figures



13. *A bronze elbow fibula* of late Median date. Length $1\frac{11}{16}$ inches*



14. *A bronze head of the Assyrian demon Pazuzu, an evil genius reputed to bring fever and sickness. Height $1\frac{5}{16}$ inches*



15

15-17), the site of Nush-i Jan appears to have been reoccupied in late Hellenistic or more probably Parthian times. Although hardly anything more than a few floors and scattered pits can be associated with this brief reoccupation, the pottery from this final phase is not without interest. Glazed bowls with concentric grooves on the inside of the base are by no means scarce, and a thin, fine, dense pottery with a gray core and a reddish to yellowish brown surface – possibly best called “cinnamon ware” – can be recognized as an outstanding local product (Figure 18).

15. *A two-handled jar of fine, pinkish buff ware.* Late VII or early VI century B.C. Height 4½ inches*



16

16. *A rim fragment from a burnished gray-ware bowl* with a horizontal handle and two decorative knobs. Late VII or early VI century B.C. Diameter 7⅛ inches*

17. *Part of a pottery handle in the shape of a duck's head with incised eyes.* Maximum length 2⅛ inches*



17

18. *A fragmentary bowl* of the extremely fine “cinnamon” ware that appears to be typical of the Parthian period at Tepe Nush-i Jan. Height 2¾ inches; diameter 8⅛ inches*



18